

Torchbearer of Madiba's name

NMU's new VC Sibongile Muthwa is fit for task of leading institution into the future, says Heather Dugmore

THE only university in the world to carry Nelson Mandela's name has appointed its first black African woman vice-chancellor, Professor Sibongile Muthwa who was inaugurated last week.

Significantly, this has taken place in the centenary year of Mandela's birth.

An experienced academic, government administrator and strategist, Muthwa is well qualified to lead the university into its new era. She holds a PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, an MSc in Development Policy and Planning from the London School of Economics, a BA Honours from Wits University and a BA in Social Work from the University of Fort Hare. From 1999 to 2004 she was the director of the Fort Hare University Institute of Government.

For the next six years she served as the director-general of the Eastern Cape provincial government. And from 2010 to 2017 she was deputy vice-chancellor: institutional support at Nelson Mandela University.

"Higher education in South Africa is emerging from major changes, which have seen students actively leading campaigns for social and educational justice for all students and workers at our universities," says Muthwa.

"As Nelson Mandela University or Mandela University as we are called, we are acutely attuned to these issues, which echo the crisis of poverty and inequality in our country. Since last year our entire outsourced workforce is now insourced and as a university we are unequivocal that every person with academic ability should have the opportunity to attend university. If they cannot afford it – a situation many families find themselves in – it must be for free."

She shares an anecdote about one of NMU's 27 000 students, Olona Maliwa, who was recently awarded the vice-chancellor's scholarship.

In receiving it Maliwa said: "I come from a community where dreams just stay dreams. People in my community who get a matric qualification and access to higher education are unable to follow their dreams due to financial difficulties. When I received the call confirming my scholarship, I realised that I had just started working on my dream."

This young woman's story takes us back to Muthwa's early years and her own dream as a girl growing up in Umbumbulu, in southern KwaZulu-Natal.

"Umbumbulu," she explains, "was much more rural then; today, like many rural areas in post-apartheid South Africa, people now have access to running water, electricity, television and many forms of modern technology. But when I grew up, old newspapers were our main source of news, and, as the



PROFESSOR SIBONGILE MUTHWA

saying goes 'news is not old if you haven't read it yet'."

Her love of reading came from her late grandfather, Mfezi Muthwa, who taught himself to read and write. "My father was a teacher and my mother a nurse, but when we were growing up, my siblings and I spent most of our time with our grandparents and I was particularly close to my grandfather.

"My grandparents had very little in the way of material means, but my grandfather had huge conviction of education as a game-changer. He also did not believe jobs were for either for men or for women. He believed, and told me many times, I could be anything and do anything." He also taught her other important values and habits. "He instilled in me the importance of a quiet moment, of waking up early to think and do things while the world is still. He taught me, by his own example that it is fine to be different, and to value the importance of independent thought. He taught me the importance of solitary contemplation as a disciplined practice that builds spiritual and mental resilience."

Muthwa says it was because of the sacrifices of her family and community leaders who believed in her that she was able to access an excellent education, including schooling at Sacred Heart Secondary School in Verulam, KwaZulu-Natal. This enabled her to advance to where she is today.

"My journey has inspired my commitment to contribute to changing the trajectory of every young person whose life I have the privilege to touch."

At her inauguration Muthwa thanked all the mentors and educators who had made a strong impression on her "about the integrity of knowledge and its power to improve humanity".

She spoke about Mr Shabalala, her high school history teacher "who totally believed in me".

"This kind of belief is what every student at Mandela University needs to feel," she says. "Belief in a person is the fuel of intelligence and ability."

Since assuming duty as vice-chancellor in January, Muthwa has demonstrated her belief in all the staff and students at NMU by embarking on an extensive listening campaign to meet them and find out what it is they need, what drives them and what they would like to see the university achieve.

"The direction we take as Mandela University depends on all of us, underpinned by our namesake's quest for a more equal and socially just world. In pursuing this, our university has embraced the philosophy of a humanising pedagogy in our teaching and learning, largely based on the liberatory education philosophy and work of Paulo Freire."

Muthwa adds that "in the face of the hard realities of our country's

broader socioeconomic, politico-cultural and environmental challenges, transformative educational leadership is at the top of the agenda, brought acutely into focus by the 2015-2016 student protests on three fundamental issues: affordability, institutional culture and the decolonisation of knowledge and curricula.

"Now that affordability is being addressed nationally, the next frontline of contestation will be institutional culture, decolonisation and the stalled transformation of SA society. Recent political changes in our country give hope that this is changing, and that we are emerging from a particularly difficult period in our young democracy.

"The signs are encouraging and it is still too early to make definitive pronouncements, but government alone cannot achieve this. The higher education sector needs to put its shoulder to the wheel. As we broaden access to quality higher education we need to ensure appropriate support mechanisms are put in place and that conditions conducive to teaching and learning prevail.

"We aim to offer multifaceted curricula relevant to both local and global contexts and which draw on a diversity of philosophical and ideological orientations and worldviews. We will soon launch a Centre for Philosophy in Africa, and this year we are launching a Social Consciousness Sustainable Futures

(SCSF) programme, largely based on student inputs and that include themes exploring what it means to be human; land, environment and food; economy, technology and dignity; the constitution, rights and freedoms; and entrepreneurship ethics and leadership.

"Our university will, within one year, establish its first Hub of Convergence, between the university and community. These hubs will be physical spaces where the university meets community to engage to find solutions to practical problems that affect our immediate communities. The hubs will provide an outward focus and will benefit from the intellectual and other assets of the university and the skills, experience and wisdom of the communities that surround us."

A commanding challenge facing all universities is resource sustainability. Towards addressing this, Muthwa says: "We are devising means to increase our revenue through cost containment and efficiency measures, new programmes, a diversified student body, and third stream income.

"Our university is securing our place in the global arena by driving innovations geared to solve current and future problems, including environmental degradation, food insecurity, rapid migration and global injustice. Our new Ocean Sciences campus and new inter-professional education health sciences strategy, which includes the development of a new medical school, SA's 10th, has placed us in an advantageous position to attract strategic partnerships and secure the talent of world-renowned academics, scholars and researchers in key and diverse fields of science, technology, innovation and the humanities.

"We see ourselves as a driver of change in Africa and the global south. The challenge, one facing all SA universities, is to develop a strong postgraduate pipeline. This starts in the first year when many students are often ill-prepared to the generally poor schooling system. This requires of the university to strengthen our instructional support and foundational programmes, as well as enhance our existing early warning systems to ensure all our students are in a conducive environment to not only complete their qualifications on time, but achieve high quality passes that give them access to the postgraduate pipeline or strong employment opportunities."

The post of vice-chancellor at a South African university today is one of the most complex, difficult jobs in the land, and while Muthwa is under no illusions, she is optimistic about her new role.

"This university has long embarked on courageous conversations about the nature of the institution we want to become, and I am indebted to Professor Derrick Swartz, our former VC, for his sterling and visionary work.

"Having been part of this journey, and in various ways influenced many of the positions that have been adopted, I have particular affinity with our vision to be a dynamic 21st century African university. We will strive, with great pride and humility, to live up to our responsibility of leading the world's only university that officially carries Nelson Mandela's name."

Heather Dugmore is a freelance journalist